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ABSTRACT

Incidence of parental divorce remains at record levels. Studies estimate that 45% of all children born since 1970 will spent an average of six childhood years in a single-parent home as a result of divorce. This study examined the relationship between visitation practices of non-custodial parents and the children's coping resources (self-esteem and self-efficacy) during the postdivorce period. Also, the effects of visitation on interparental conflict witnessed by children were explored. The families of 35 elementary school children in Montreal were given appropriate questionnaires and measures. Results indicated that there was a positive relationship between the duration of parental visitation and the child's self-esteem, but there seemed to be no relation between visitation characteristics and self-efficacy. It is not surprising that, as the frequency of visitation with the non-custodial parent increased, so did levels of overt marital hostility reported. The study indicates that as the length of visits with the noncustodial parent increases, children's views of their own worth increase. However, children's self-esteem is not significantly associated with frequency of visitation. This may be because frequency of visitation seems to increase the level of overt marital hostility in the family social climate. (CC)

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Access by noncustodial parents: Effects upon children's postdivorce coping resources

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Access by noncustodial parents: Effects upon children's postdivorce coping resources

Abstract

The incidence of parental divorce remains at record levels. This investigation examined the relationship between visitation practices made by noncustodial parents (i.e., frequency and duration of contacts) and children's psychological coping resources (i.e., self esteem and self-efficacy) during the postdivorce period. The effects of such visitation practices upon interparental conflict witnessed by children were explored as well. Thirty-five divorced families with sole custody of elementary school children participated. Analyses revealed a relationship between duration of visits and children's self-esteem. Frequency of visitation with the noncustodial parent was found to be associated with the level of interparental hostility.

Access by noncustodial parents: Effects upon children's postdivorce coping resources

It is estimated that 45 per cent of all children born since 1970 will experience an average of six childhood years in a single-parent home, as a consequence of divorce (Hetherington, Stanley-Hagan, & Anderson, 1989). Short and long term adverse effects have been well documented (e.g., Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1989).

Custody determinations vary across divorcing couples, regardless of whether internally settled or court imposed. Nevertheless, the majority of custody arrangements continues to be sole maternal custody, consequently constricting the fathers role in decision making with respect to children's development during the postdivorce period (Sorenson & Goldman, 1990). As a result, children frequently experience vastly diminished contact with their fathers, straining the potential influence of this social coping resource variable. Still further, mothers are usually encumbered with the preponderance of child-rearing responsibilities while attempting to resume their individual aspirations with respect to work and relationships following the divorce.

It has been demonstrated that family disruption is associated with altered parent-child relationships, and that the noncustodial parent-child relationship is most likely to suffer (Hetherington et al., 1989; Stanley Hagan, Hollier, O'Conner, & Eisenberg, 1992). Interestingly, findings addressing children's adaptation to family transition strongly suggest that the quality of both parent-child relationships mediate children's developmental outcomes in emotional, academic, and social spheres (Hetherington et al., 1989). In fact, noncustodial parent-child contact and involvement has been suggested as a strong correlate of the quality parent-child relationship (Kurtz & Derevensky, 1992).

The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between visitation practices made by noncustodial parents (i.e., frequency and duration of contacts) and children's psychological coping resources (i.e., self esteem and self-efficacy) during the postdivorce period. The effects of such visitation practices upon interparental conflict witnessed by children were investigated as well. It was hypothesized that children's self referent thought would be affected by parental access and that the resulting interparental contact would be associated with overt marital hostility. This research provides information regarding what time-sharing arrangements are optimal during the postdivorce

period, an issue that clinicians, family mediators, and legislators have pondered about for the past two decades.

Method

Subjects

Middle-class families of 35 elementary school-age children (mean age=9.1), selected a from a voluntary sample using a stratified sampling technique in Montreal, participated in this investigation. Parents were divorced for an average of four years and experienced sole custody child-care arrangements (88% maternal, 12% paternal).

Measures

1. Family Background survey [FBS]

The FBS is a questionnaire assessing family characteristics.

2. Harter Self Perception Profile For Children [HSPP] (Harter ,1985)

The HSPP is used to measure self-esteem (global self worth subscale) and self-efficacy (a composite score of Social, Cognitive, and Behavioral subscale).

3. Overt Marital Hostility Scale [OPS] (Porter & O'Leary, 1980)

The OPS is used to assess interparental conflict witnessed by children.

Procedure

Parents were requested to complete the FBS and OPS. Children were administered the HSPP during school hours.

Results

A multiple regression model was employed, using noncustodial visitation practices as the independent variable (frequency and duration). Duration of visitation significantly predicted children's self-esteem [$F(2,32)=4.72$, $p<.05$]. Self-efficacy was not found to be related to visitation characteristics. It was not surprising that as the frequency of visitation with the noncustodial parent increased, the level of overt-marital hostility reported by the custodial parent increased, as a significant predictive relationship was observed between these factors [$F(8,29)=7.18$, $p<.01$].

Discussion

This study investigated the relationship between duration and frequency of visitation by the noncustodial parent and children's self-referent thought, a psychological coping resource variable. The hypothesis was partially supported in that the analyses revealed a relationship between duration of visits and children's self-esteem. That is, as the length of the visits with the noncustodial parent increased children's general views of their own worth

increased. Longer contacts with noncustodial parents may positively influence children's global estimates of self-worth through the strengthened quality of the parent-child relationship.

It is interesting to note that self-esteem was not significantly associated with frequency of visitation. Perhaps this is because frequency of visitation by the noncustodial parent was found to be related with the level of overt marital hostility in the family social climate. More specifically, as frequency of visitation increased, the level of interparental hostility also increased, and in turn this may have undermined self-esteem in some children. Although the average time since parental divorce was four years, the prolonged conflict in the family environment was not surprising, as Wallerstein and Blakeslee (1989) have observed that interparental hostility continues long after the divorce. Moreover, children's risk for problems in adaptation have been found to be directly related to the extent of aggression between parents (Block, Block, & Gjerde, 1988; Johnston, Gonzales, & Campbell, 1987).

Self-efficacy, a measure of perceived self-competence in a specific situation (Bandura, 1986), was not found to be associated with either characteristics of visitation. This was unexpected in light of findings indicating that children from divorced homes tend to report lower levels of perceived self-efficacy in academic domains than their peers from intact families (Kurtz & Derevensky, in press). Methodological issues, limitations of the present findings, and clinical implications will be discussed.

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